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SENSITIVE

STATE FOR WHA AND USOAS, DS/IP/WHA, DSERCC, DS/IP/ITA

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TAGS: PREL PGOV ASEC KCRM HA MINUSTAH

SUBJECT: HAITI: GOVERNMENT, MINUSTAH, AND POLICE BATTLE

KIDNAPPING PHENOMENON

REF: A. PAP 1252

B. 2004 PAP 1747

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A recent increase in the number of kidnappings in Port-au-Prince has put the government and police under increasing pressure to respond. The government has raised the penalty for kidnapping to life-imprisonment and announced May 9 the establishment of a joint HNP-MINUSTAH anti-kidnapping unit. Over the weekend, an HNP operation led to the liberation of three hostages and the arrest of fifteen alleged kidnappers. End Summary.

Kidnapping become political issue

¶2. (U) During the past several weeks, there has been an increase in the number of kidnappings in Port-au-Prince. Statistics are notoriously elusive here, but based on the number of cases we hear about (roughly 4-5 per week for the past 6-8 weeks) the range could be between 25-40 new cases in this latest span. Most of the attacks have targeted wealthy-appearing locals and nearly all have been resolved within several days by the payment of a ransom, with the victim released unhurt, though two victims were beaten by their captors. The starting ransom demand is often 150,000-200,000 (U.S. dollars) but most ransoms end up significantly lower, sometimes as low as \$1,000. Nevertheless, the fact that ransoms are paid has given criminals a quick method of obtaining cash. Three foreigners, a Russian UN worker, an Indian businessman, and a Taiwanese businessman, have been kidnapped in the past month. The first two were targets of opportunity, not targeted victims.

¶3. (SBU) There is little evidence that the kidnappings have been politically motivated, although at least two victims heard politically-motivated statements from their captors. (One of those victims, Jean-Enold Buteau, is a well-known political leader but also a physician; he told us that his captors justified their ill treatment of him by saying he had helped overthrow Aristide). The kidnapping wave has nonetheless become a political issue, sparking growing criticism of the government and police, and to a lesser extent of MINUSTAH, for their seeming inability to put a stop to it. Haitian business leaders have been particularly vocal, including in recent meetings with Embassy officials, saying that dealing with the kidnapping threat is taking precedence over every other activity, political or economic. The private sector issued a communiqu May 4 calling for the mobilization of the various sectors in face of the growing insecurity in Haiti, and the Group 184 and a prominent student organization plan a protest march on May 11 to complain about the level of insecurity. Interim Prime Minister Latorue, who has publicly called on the various sectors to seek dialogue on issues rather than demonstrate in the streets, reportedly told business leaders privately last week that his government could not do any more than it was already doing. Among the recent victims have been several school directors, and the capital has witnessed several spontaneous demonstrations by elementary students protesting against their principal's kidnapping.

IGOH Response: Tougher sentences, cooperation with MINUSTAH

¶4. (U) In response to the problem and the growing political challenge it represents, the Interim Government (IGOH) has slowly begun to take action. The Council of Ministers adopted a measure May 4 increasing the penalty for kidnapping to life-imprisonment with hard labor. Justice Minister Gousse said that the current penalty of one to five years was insufficient. Henceforth, "any individual who kidnaps, abducts, holds hostage, or simply attempts to kidnap somebody for ransom will be sentenced to forced labor for life." During a May 6 speech in Jeremie, PM Latorue acknowledged the kidnapping problem and said the decree was only the first step in increasing the overall level of security.

¶5. (U) On May 7, the Haitian National Police (HNP) undertook several operations against kidnappers in the Port-au-Prince neighborhoods of Bel-Air and Delmas 42. HNP

spokesperson Coicou told reporters on May 8 that during the operations, the police had liberated three hostages, arrested fifteen alleged kidnappers, seized several weapons and recovered an unknown number of stolen vehicles. The three victims had been kidnapped throughout the previous week for unknown ransom demands. One victim was a Haitian married to a French national.

16. (U) Of potentially greater significance, PM Latortue announced May 8 the formation of a joint HNP-MINUSTAH anti-kidnapping unit. We understand that this will bring together MINUSTAH military and CIVPOL units with specially selected HNP officers, similar to the Major Crimes Unit that was temporarily established last year in response to a similar wave of kidnappings. We will report details on this new cooperation as soon as possible.

17. (SBU) One of the alleged kidnappers arrested in the operation was Francel Jasmin, identified as a member of the Front for National Reconstruction (FRN) political party. No accusations have been raised that the FRN was involved in any kidnappings, but FRN Secretary General Guy Phillippe, speaking publicly on May 9, was quick to defend Jasmin, saying that the party had engaged legal services on behalf of its member. He added, however, that it was impossible to keep "bad elements" out of the party, and that Jasmin would have to face the judicial process. In a statement defending himself, Jasmin said HNP investigators interviewing him had also implied the collusion of Richard Chevalier with some of the kidnappers. Chevalier, a former member of the OAS police advisory team funded by INL, helped with vetting HNP recruits and, later, supported a temporary anti-kidnapping unit set up by the HNP in mid-2004 (ref B). The Embassy has long since severed its relationship with Chevalier, but it has come to light recently that he has been posing as an "agent" of the Embassy and/or DEA.

Comment

18. (SBU) Kidnapping has became a major issue over the past month, with nearly every political commentator criticizing the IGOH for its inability to put a stop to it once and for all. This weekend's success in breaking up an apparent kidnapping ring allows the IGOH and police to show they can back up rhetoric with action, and has provided some much-needed breathing room for the PM as well as a boost to the self-esteem of the HNP, which has been rumored to have some of its own members responsible for the spike in kidnappings. That said, kidnapping wealthy individuals remains a profitable way to earn quick money, both for criminals and for those with more political goals. It remains to be seen how much effect these latest steps will have. End Comment.

GRIFFITHS